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Abstract

It is often argued that as “consumers” of higher education, students, parents and leaders need objective, comparative information generated through systematized assessment. In response, we critique this trend toward reductionist, comparative, and ostensibly objective assessments in the United States. We describe how management has replaced democratic self-governance in higher education, and connect current managerial leadership with the use of assessment as a tool in furthering market based educational aims. Lastly, we provide an alternative view of assessment as an ethical, value concerned social practice that creates space for dialogue about how higher education contributes to learning toward the public good.

Assessment for Whom: Repositioning Higher Education Assessment as an Ethical and Value-Focused Social Practice

Since the 1980s, the emergence of assessment as a common institutional activity in United States higher education occurred without significant scrutiny of its underlying structure that framed its purposes and practice. Rather, the emphasis of scholarly writing on assessment has been on how to, with particular focus on instrumental and technical approaches to practice (Hursh & Wall, 2011). The emphasis on the technique of assessment is grounded in a pragmatic and largely unsubstantiated view that assessment practice and its associated outcomes are well-established. In this paper, we critique assessment in higher education by examining for whom this practice has been oriented. Consequently, we argue that assessment has become an element of a managerial administrative practice heavily influenced by neoliberal ideology. First, we use neoliberalism as an analytic tool to examine whose interests are served by current assessment practice. Second, we reposition assessment practice as a form of academic capital within an academic capitalist knowledge economy. Third, we reveal how assessment has become a tool of social control within managed professional culture, rather than as a component of shared governance. And fourth, we propose an alternative conceptualization of assessment as an ethical, value-based social practice for the public good.

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Our approach in this paper is a critical one for the purpose of illustrating how power is a component of assessment practice. We recognize that not everyone will agree with our analysis of power structures that we see acting to frame assessment practice in higher education. We respect that those practicing assessment have individual agency that allows individuals and institutions to build meaningful assessment practices in spite of the overarching structure of the higher education policy environment. However, we see increased attention to power, and questioning whom assessment is serving, as central to expanding the discussion of what type of practice should be engaged by the assessment community. Indeed, the question we ask here of “assessment for whom?” is a key question that needs to be continually engaged.

The Socio-Political Evolution of Assessment in Higher Education

There is no common definition for assessment in higher education. Rather, any definition grows out of social context. For some, assessment is about examining student learning, for others, examining programs, and still others, determining institutional effectiveness. In this paper we conceive of assessment broadly, as a set of activities that seeks to gather systematic evidence to determine the worth and value of things in higher education. These activities might examine learning, programs or the quality of institutional activities, and the purpose may be to judge (account), improve, or advance learning. What has been clearer is the chorus cry for increased assessment activities invariably linked to calls for accreditation and accountability of the performance of U.S. based higher education (Burke & Associates, 2005; Ewell, 2005, 2009; Zumeta, 2005). As Cronbach (1982) wrote, this movement's efforts were rooted in an effort "to assign praise or blame" and "as a sign of a pathology in the political system" (p. 4).

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It is not accidental that assessment in higher education emerged over a 25-year period in which a perceived educational crisis has undermined public trust, and displaced higher education's duty to serve learning for the public good with an increased emphasis on serving the needs of the market (Gumport, 2000; Rhoads & Rhoades, 2005; Tierney & Rhoads, 1995). Current U.S. assessment practices in higher education grew out of, and were in response to, national reports in the 1980s such as "Involvement in Learning" (National Institute of Education, 1984). They continue to be supported by more recent reports, such as "Charting the Future: A Test of Leadership" (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). These reports call for performance accountability in higher education aimed at quantifying its contribution to economic growth within the global capitalist market (Apple, 2000; Rhoads & Rhoades, 2005).

Higher education, in the U.S. and abroad, has been called upon to increase human and intellectual capital in the context of the new knowledge economy (Olssen & Peters, 2005). University research and student learning have been increasingly placed within national interests associated with economic development and global market competitiveness. Market management accountability approaches associated with meeting the needs of the market are replacing professional accountability (Burke, 2005). Market or consumer-oriented ends are replacing traditional purposes of higher education, such as providing a liberal education, developing intrinsically valuable knowledge, and serving society (Kezar, 2005). In this context, assessment has become a tool of managerial and market-based accountability that subverts traditional aims and instead plays a direct role in aligning institutions with external market-based performance pressures. Assessment serves an emerging market-focused university, without equal attention to questions associated with what Slaughter and Rhoades (2005) have called the teaching and learning, or public good, knowledge regime. A public good knowledge regime has been described as one that emphasizes higher education's contribution to the public good, or benefits accruing to everyone rather than individual consumers.

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The shift from a public service orientation to a market model has been marked by a managerialism that has been based upon industry logic (Gumport, 2000). This includes emphasizing knowledge production for commoditization, and increasing competition between higher education institutions for funding and students (Giroux, 2003; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Consequently, as institutions compete with one another, they seek ways to distinguish themselves, including explicitly presenting themselves as a "brand," with a unique identity and market product. Assessment practices, evolving in and reflecting this market orientation, are too often employed by organizational leaders to cater to the bottom line associated with institutional success, as opposed to the public good.

Who Does Assessment Serve?

In order to critically examine who is served by current assessment practices, we first explore the way in which the term assessment has been framed by using neoliberal ideology as a conceptual lens. Neoliberalism descends from classical liberalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in which liberal social philosophers, including Locke (1690/1960) and Hobbes (1651/1968), argued that the authority of the church and crown should be replaced by "the principles of civil rights, the rights to property, a limited conception of state power, and a broadly negative conception of freedom" (Olssen, Codd, & O'Neill, 2004, p. 80). Neoliberalism broadens classical liberal theory to argue that individuals and corporations work best when

markets and international trade are completely de-regulated, and taxes, and therefore social programs, are minimized (Harvey, 2005).

A discourse of crisis frames assessment as a practice of control in which increased scrutiny is the answer to perceived limitations to higher education performance (Tierney & Rhoads, 1995). The administrators and policy makers who framed higher education assessment practice are “also the ones who identified the crisis” (Tierney & Rhoads, 1995, p. 105). They have used the perceived crisis to call for examining educational expenditures and outcomes as part of an agenda to redefine the purpose of higher education toward serving the global marketplace. The social contract, or, the investiture in higher education for societal benefit, shifted toward a practice of establishing links between higher education and economic development (Ewell, 2005, 2009).

Political and social movements drove assessment practice as much, if not more, than changes in technology and methodology. Neoliberalism and the emphasis on accountability were the neoconservative and neoliberal response to the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, neoconservatives and neoliberals asserted that universities had broken the public trust, and seldom served society. Therefore, those in power argued that higher education needed to be held accountable by government and business through measurement of performance. Assessment became the tool for promoting accountability, specifically for those distrustful of higher education.

In many ways, the emergence of assessment for accountability in higher education during the 1980s came about due to the rise in neoliberal informed public policy. Approaches to assessment responded to neoconservative cultural and neoliberal economic critiques of higher education’s societal purpose (Apple, 2000; Newfield, 2008; Robertson, 2007). The culture of increased scrutiny solidified the approach toward assessment during the 1990s. While states were cutting budgets, policy-makers took an even harder look at higher education expenditures (Trow, 1996; Zumeta, 2001). In the context of these shifting social, political, and economic drivers, the perception and values informing neoliberalism became the status quo. In this view, higher education had received a “free ride” for far too long.

A cynical public attitude toward the professed “good” of higher education increased skepticism that students were learning anything at all (Arum & Roska, 2011). Consequently, in order to reveal and identify higher education’s failings (be it for improvement), assessment initiatives aimed to quantify the learning process. Moreover, the emergence of state performance funding, and the firm entrenchment of national rankings, advanced the view that quantification of higher education performance was necessary and inevitable (Banta, Rudolph, van Dyke, & Fisher, 1996; McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, & Perez, 1998). Concurrently, alternative approaches to assessing the value of higher education are not a pre-eminent component of this assessment for accountability narrative; rather, there has been willful ignorance, even at times disdain, of alternative forms of assessment practice that eschew neoliberal concern for quantification of performance.

The historical reasons assessment practices relied heavily on quantitative data and related methodology correctness are multiple and complex. On one level, it is driven by a need to produce something that is objective and quantifiable, which, in effect, creates the illusion that “to be rational is *not* to engage in moral or political speculation, critique, interpretation, dialogue, or judgment” (Schwandt, 1996). As campuses initiate internal assessment, counting, or quantifying, has been a place to start, a seemingly harmless position on its face. The press for quantitative data is also the press to compare peer institutions for national rankings, or for reporting to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System of the National Center for Educational Statistics, or as part of state accountability in the form of performance monitoring and funding.

The push for assessment for accountability promotes collecting comparable, and therefore quantifiable standardized data across institutions. Standardized evidence makes it possible for institutions to seek regional or national prestige via rankings, for legislators and funding agencies to efficiently compare organizations, and for the public, now positioned as consumers, to “objectively” compare institutions in the spirit of *Consumer Reports*. Quantitative data are valued in an increasingly managerial environment where efficiency,

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comparability, replicability, and external validity are tools in a managerial toolkit. Because a neoliberal policy framework has driven assessment practice, select public investments, rather than the overall public good, prevail in policy-making decisions (Apple, 2000). These efforts are packaged as necessary to ensure that students can compete in the global marketplace (Burbules & Torres, 2000; Torres & Rhoads, 2006).

In a neoliberal policy context, methods of assessment are tools policy makers use to hold institutions accountable to the tax-paying public by evaluating quantifiable institutional data.

Policy-makers have restructured and disabled revenue streams, as well as shifted blame for shortcomings of higher education from the governmental entities that fund them to the institutions themselves. This has been accomplished while simultaneously touting the benefits of the marketplace as an adjudicator of the distribution of funds. Higher education institutions pursue institutional self-interests oriented to the market, with a sincere nod toward more traditional social good aims. Institutions' focus on market-oriented self-interests send them down a slippery slope that requires them to continuously redefine their mission from primarily serving the public, to focus predominantly on competing, surviving, and striving to be mission-centered in the global marketplace (Fallis, 2007; Mortimer & Sathre, 2006; Zemsky, Wegner, & Massy, 2005).

In a neoliberal policy context, methods of assessment are tools policy makers use to hold institutions accountable to the tax-paying public by evaluating quantifiable institutional data. A value system in which data are used to prove an ideological point associated with neoliberal concerns for performance and cultivated in an environment motivated by a fear of the loss of rationality (Schwandt, 1996). Scrutiny for the public sector drives accountability mechanisms that chip away at, and eventually tear down, institutions in order to rebuild them based on a model that serves the interest of global capitalism, as opposed to the public welfare. For the past two decades, this neoliberal paradigm has controlled the methods, values, and use of assessment practice in higher education.

Assessment as a Form of Symbolic Capital

In a neoliberal policy environment, assessment processes, outputs, and outcomes have become a form of what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) describe as symbolic capital. Higher education engages in assessment practice not simply for discovery, critical reflection, or to ensure student learning (though it is essential to note that they do that), but also to develop symbolic "academic capital" for use in marketing materials, lobbying, and furthering institutional prestige. The value of the symbolic capital developed by assessment processes serves the interests of quantifying higher education toward what Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) have termed an academic capitalist knowledge regime, in which knowledge has value as a commodity.

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In an academic capitalist knowledge regime, the function of the university became development of knowledge as a commodity that could be monetized in the global marketplace. This commoditization of knowledge translates research discoveries into applications that spurred economic development (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). The university moved from a location that freely exchanges knowledge, toward an institution that aims to monetize knowledge so that it may maximize institutional interests. The increased use of assessment shifted teaching and learning activities toward seeing learning by students as a form of symbolic "academic capital." Assessment becomes a way to quantify learning, a process that certainly serves the interests of advancing practices of teaching and learning, but also contorts these practices toward seeing learning and what is learned as a commodity. Thus, assessment for whom, and toward what ends, becomes a central question in identifying the purposes of assessment.

In a review of the purpose of assessment, Ewell (2002, 2009) suggests that assessment in higher education can serve both the interests of accountability and improvement purposes. Ewell roots the advent of the assessment movement in "a combination of curriculum reform reports that called for greater curricular coherence, the use of powerful pedagogies known to be associated with high learning gains, and knowledge about student outcomes and experiences" (Ewell, 2009, p. 5). While Ewell's portrayal is appealing, it under-appreciates the symbolic academic capital that politicizes assessment activities in a neoliberal political environment. Assessment is not simply a balancing act between accountability and improvement, or what Harlen (2005) describes as "assessment of learning" and "assessment for learning," but has

been rooted in a neoliberal political context that defines both purposes. Assessment for improvement and accountability serve a market rationale associated with the universities creating workers and knowledge for economic development, rather than primarily serving more abstract educational purposes associated with developing human beings, advancing democracy, or creating a just world.

The politicized culture of accountability and improvement purposes of assessment are illustrated by examining how *U.S. News and World Report* (USN&WR) rankings of higher education have created symbolic academic capital oriented to market benefit (Ehrenberg, 2002; Ewell, 2005, 2009; Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999; Pike, 2004). There is limited evidence that the USN&WR rankings and their underlying metrics attend to desirable institutional behavior beyond the quest of institutional self-betterment and prestige. Rather, the rankings point toward a view of prestige that values educational inputs (as an example ACT/ SAT test scores, teacher to student ratios), rather than activities fostering improved educational practices (Pike, 2004). What the rankings do accomplish is the development of a culture of assessment as highly valued symbolic academic capital, a capital that is operationalized in the market of higher education as institutions enroll students, hire faculty, and advance prestige goals. Rhoades and Sporn (2002) describe how the development of assessment ranking systems push institutions toward similarity of function and purpose, or isomorphism, rather than toward diversity to serve a global society's diverse post-secondary educational populations and needs (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

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Assessment as Social Control in a Managed Professional Environment

Assessment and related symbolic capital exist as a component of managed professional, or market managed culture of efficiency, revenue and prestige goals (Burke, 2005; Rhoades, 1998). This does not deny that assessment has been a tool to advance learning, in fact it has, but the challenge is in identifying which assessment purpose has dominated. In such a context, assessment risks becoming the servant of a culture that Rhoades (1998) termed "managed professional," where administrators have used assessment as a tool of significant control over faculty. Lechuga (2008) provides a specific example of this phenomenon in his study of for-profit universities, in which he describes using assessment as a tool of social control over the teaching and learning enterprise, with the purported aim of ensuring quality and efficiency. Classroom assessments became mechanisms of ensuring student consumer satisfaction, thereby providing evidence of quality and supporting staffing and curriculum decisions (Lechuga, 2008). Mentkowski and Associates (2000) offer a counter example where assessment served as a tool to transform campus culture and enhance learning with faculty support at Alverno College, offering an example of the potential of assessment beyond social control.

Assessment as a means of social control is not evident simply in for-profit university environments; rather, the process of assessment in multiple institutional contexts has vestiges of subtle social control as well. What is measured has value, or becomes valued as it is measured (Hursh, 2008; Patton, 1997). Administrators, in measuring what has value, control the assessment resource allocations, thus holding power over what has enough value to be measured. Too often faculty see assessment as another task that pulls them away from the research for which they were trained, and are more highly rewarded. Assessment is instigated and advanced by administrators, and either sold to, or imposed upon faculty through necessary accreditation processes, rather than becoming a component of shared governance and an integrated component of faculty teaching and learning responsibilities (though many advance a view of integrated assessment into teaching and learning as desirable, see Angelo & Cross, 1993; Ewell, 2009; Shulman, 2007). Increasingly assessment has been tasked to professional assessment staff who have well-intended organizational responsibility. In instances when administrators earnestly reach out to engage faculty in assessment efforts, the tepid response of faculty often makes it necessary for administrators to press forward without shared ownership.

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Assessment has emerged, be it through noble or coercive intentions, as a component of a managed professional culture, rather than as a mechanism of shared governance. It is now another mechanism by which administrators assert authority over the university, including the educational activities of faculty. While there is significant rationale to support the need to pay greater attention to the products of what has been learned by college students, the move to

place assessment as a part of what Burke and Associates (2005) term “managerial,” or “market accountability,” replaces professional accountability mechanisms. The move to managerial or market accountability places assessment within a neoliberal ideology. This is a position that is often described as inevitable, or as Rhoads and Rhoades (2005) indicate, “Few call into question the philosophical positions suggested by various measurement and evaluative processes” (p. 250) associated with a managerial approach.

Situating Assessment within Evaluation as a Socio-Political Practice

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The current culture of assessment rooted in neoliberal ideology is not inevitable; the underlying philosophical assumptions associated with measuring higher education’s processes, outputs, and outcomes, can and should take alternative forms. Assessment as a managerial tool of accountability can be replaced or revised in line with alternative views of shared higher education governance for the public good. In an aim to reconstruct assessment for the public good, we develop three points: First, we situate assessment as a social practice sharing conceptual elements with evaluation and applied social science, but distinct in its own right; second, we conceptually group approaches to assessment in higher education using Alkin’s (2004) branches of evaluation theory as a means to illuminate multiple philosophies guiding assessment practice; and third, we examine the purposes of assessment in higher education.

We see assessment in higher education as differentiated from applied social science research, though assessment draws upon its traditions and approaches. While assessment evolution has included connections to mastery learning and as a tool of benchmarking education performance, we view assessment as a subset of, and is intertwined with, the broader practice of evaluation and qualitative social science research practices that have focused on understanding the value of things in social context (Ewell, 2002; Scriven, 1991; Vogt, 2006). In practice, assessment commonly engages in examinations of individual student learning, aggregation of individual learning, and increasingly, examinations of curricula or programs that make assessment practice synonymous with evaluation that explore the “worth and values of things” (Scriven, 1991, p. 1).

Assessment as Social Practice

As Wehlburg (2008) points out, assessment in higher education operates in a charged political context. This omnipresent social context frames the practice of assessment as not simply socially situated but what Gee (1998) has called a social practice. A social practice is differentiated from a socially situated practice in three ways: First, a social practice is a complex capability, rather than the acquisition of a set of skills; second, the same practices in different settings will have different results; and third, a social practice is developed through learning in practice, from mentoring and experiential learning, rather than from mastery of a set of abstract knowledge.

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When assessment is repositioned as a social practice, it is fraught with power dynamics that directly influence framing, implementation, interpretation and use. Then, the social position of those involved in the work becomes a central element of practice, just as is the case in qualitative social science research and many approaches to evaluation (Alkin, 2004; Lincoln, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The act of conducting assessment, whether using qualitative or quantitative data gathering approaches, is a political act and the relative stance of those conducting assessment becomes central to practice itself. Just as many in the evaluation community have noted, assessment is centrally an ethical and valuing practice, in which a value stance is advocated, be it scientific, social justice, or democratic (Greene, 1997). Assessment, as intertwined with and a subset of evaluation, should be conceived as a practice that attends more fully to the social and political position that it occupies within institutions.

Assessment as an ethical and valuing social practice could benefit significantly from drawing upon the qualitative social science and evaluation work that has included conceptualization of practice that address ethical and value concerns inherent in the social and political institutional environments where assessment is carried out (Alkin, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1997). This thinking must be considered in addition to the skills related to method, procedures and techniques, in order for individuals to develop a social practice of assessment as a complex capability.

Rather than casting assessment as a tool of improving learning or accountability through the use of technical tools for higher education to advance efficiency, learning, market or institutional prestige goals, we wish to reposition assessment first and foremost as an ethical and valuing practice. Furthermore, we see assessment as pedagogy, or a form of self-reflection, critique, and learning (Greene, 1997; House & Howe, 2000; McDonald, 1983; Schwandt, 1997). Viewing assessment as having pedagogical purposes comes from value-oriented approaches to evaluation that promote democratic values of inclusion, dialogue, deliberation, and social justice. The view that assessment practitioners should have a pedagogical purpose comes from the idea that evaluation should not simply be a “unilateral act” of an individual or individuals, but an activity of engaged practice in which the context of education forms the basis for engagement in inquiry (Schwandt, 2003, p. 356). In this view, assessment, like evaluation,

is a practical, material and political undertaking concerned with examining and enhancing the ways we make interpretative judgments of the value of human actions that unfold in specific social, historical and cultural contexts. A scientific and theoretical engagement with practice is a technical undertaking, while a practical engagement with practice is a pedagogical undertaking. (Schwandt, 2003, p. 357)

Assessment as a pedagogical practice makes it possible for individuals in a given assessment context to recognize themselves as socio-political actors who are engaged in an assessment dialogue about the nature of their work. This view recognizes the complexity of practice and the difficulty of making practical judgments about how to best engage students in learning and best carry out the activities of a given higher education institution. Indeed, this view acknowledges assessment as a component of being a reflective professional operating in the complex, messy, modern environment of higher education.

Repositioning Assessment as an Ethical and Value-Based Practice

Repositioning assessment in higher education as an ethical and value-based practice is in keeping with the valuing branch of Alkin’s (2004) evaluation tree metaphor. Alkin’s evaluation theory tree has grouped approaches to evaluation into having use, method, or values foci. The application of a conceptual organization of assessment practice highlights differences among ways of thinking, and provides guidance for different ways that assessment might be thought about and practiced. For instance, the utilization-focused evaluation approach of Patton (1997) guides evaluation practice toward maximizing use of evaluative process and results, rather than seeing use of results simply as a component of an assessment loop (Green, Jones, & Aloï, 2008). The higher education literature is replete with the examples of assessment framed with a focus on methods, such as the preeminent Input-Environment-Output (I-E-O) model and associated methods as outlined by Astin (1991).

The value branch of Alkin’s (2004) theory tree perceives evaluation as a value-oriented practice, and provides frameworks for moral and ethical dimensions of practice. In valuing deliberative democratic practice, House and Howe (2000) identify inclusion, and dialogue and deliberation as critical facets of the process of evaluation. Greene (1997, 2000) focuses on the value stance of an evaluator, positioning evaluation first as a moral and ethical practice, and second, as technical or procedural. The focus on values or value-stances in evaluation provides direction for how the socio-political context of assessment can be engaged as a component of practice. Kezar, Gleen, Lester, and Nakamoto (2008), along with Ladson-Billings (1998), offer value-oriented approaches to assessment in higher education that focus on examining questions of equity and culturally-relevant practice. Kezar et al. (2008) and Ladson-Billings’s (1998) value-oriented approaches provide insight into how assessment can be constructed as a moral and ethical practice that responds to key social questions associated with whom higher education serves, and towards what end. Use and value approaches to assessment do not negate the need to examine method, but prompt us to question the socio-political context of assessment efforts.

Five Foundational Responsibilities of Individuals Conducting Assessment

As practical guidance toward repositioning assessment as an ethical and valuing social practice we proposed five foundational responsibilities that should underpin individual assessment practice. First, individuals engaged in assessment are responsible for acknowledging

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the ethical nature of their work. They must identify, and make clear their position relative to the work to be done. While this idea has similarity to qualitative discussions of researcher position, here the focus is not simply on how an individual's background biases influence their interpretations. An ethical practice of assessment asks those engaged in assessment to identify whose interests are being served in conducting a particular assessment process. Has a process been mandated, what methods are deemed credible, what questions are acceptable to be asked, and what organizational consequences might be "in play" depending upon what an assessment process reveals? How do these concerns interplay with one's own preferred methods of data collection and how an individual is socially positioned? Each of these questions conceptually frame the freedom and stakes present in every assessment process and firmly place assessment practice as fraught with ethical decisions that should be surfaced and engaged.

The repositioning has the potential to raise consciousness of how assessment processes are framed by the neoliberal policy context, thereby raising the importance of illuminating ethical value laden positions that are adopted in the process of conducting assessment.

Second, assessment as an ethical and value-based practice should make transparent the purpose(s) of an assessment process. The purpose of assessment includes clear identification of assessment questions, but also considers the consequential nature of the use of assessment information. Is information associated with an assessment process part of performance review, to be used in accreditation, for institutional marketing or political positioning, a research project with publication goals, to advance learning or solely to identify program improvement? Surfacing both the apparent and underlying reasons that an assessment process has been initiated is essential to conducting assessment as an ethical social practice.

Third, an ethical and value-based assessment practice must make transparent the primary, secondary, and tertiary stakeholders. Attention should be particularly paid to intentionally and unintentionally excluded stakeholders. Individuals conducting assessment should make transparent who has and has not been considered in how assessment processes are designed, what methods are employed, who provides data (the sample), who conducts analysis, and who has access to data and results. Identifying whose interests are served in the practice of assessment is central to understand and illuminate as a part of the process of doing assessment work.

By raising consciousness of the ethical and value-based decisions implicit in any assessment context, the practice of assessment truly becomes a complex social practice rather than a collection of technical data gathering approaches that might unwittingly serve power interests unintended by well-meaning individuals.

Fourth, an ethical and value-based assessment practice should base method selection upon finding congruence between method, ethical and value commitments. Individual predetermined competence or preference for a particular way to gather information should be a secondary rationale for data gathering method adoption. Identifying credible methods to fit with ethical concerns and value commitments associated with transparently identified purposes, identified stakeholder needs, and concerns over whose interests are served by different data gathering approaches should frame decisions of methods, rather than deep seated concerns that pull assessment practice into the methods wars. We see method selection as responsive to ethical concerns about the consequential nature of how credible information can be developed to advance ethical and value driven institutional concerns. We exclude no approach to data gathering, but rather steer selection as responsive to social context in keeping with the view that assessment is a social practice where the same practices (methods) engaged in different context will have different results.

Fifth, we place a special value-oriented responsibility on individuals to make interpretive judgments related to the quality and findings of an assessment process. Those who carry out assessment should engage in interpreting findings, rather than see evidence as speaking for itself and allowing others to interpret findings as if the complexity and context of the findings are self-evident. Given that assessment is a social practice, where context frames interpretations regardless of procedure of data collection, it is important that those conducting assessment interpret findings, and make statements as to their credibility, what conclusions are appropriate to draw and what recommendations for action are appropriate. An individual may decide to engage stakeholders in this process, but it is the responsibility of those directly involved in carrying out the assessment to make ultimate value claims.

Repositioning assessment as an ethical, value-based social practice allows individuals to be responsive to the social and political context that frames every assessment context. The repositioning has the potential to raise consciousness of how assessment processes are framed by the neoliberal policy context, thereby raising the importance of illuminating ethical value laden positions that are adopted in the process of conducting assessment. It may be

the case that practitioners still engage in a practice that necessarily adheres to developing symbolic capital, but it may also be the case that by elevating ethical and value-based concerns practitioners can engage in work that intentionally examines a broader range of issues including how institutional activities serve the public good.

Conclusion

We have critically examined the practice of assessment in higher education by exploring how the neoliberal paradigm has framed how we think about assessment. Giroux (2002) observes that “the language of neoliberalism and the emerging corporate university radically alter the vocabulary available for appraising the meaning of citizenship, agency, and civic virtue” (p. 456). We reject neoliberal discourse as it relates to higher education because it weakens our moral purpose and undermines society’s well-being. If the goal of higher education is to serve the public good, rather than primarily positioning institutions and individuals in financial markets for the purpose of self-sufficiency, then we propose that assessment can be framed as an ethical, valuing social practice that seeks to make clear whose interests are served through a particular assessment process. By raising consciousness of the ethical and value-based decisions implicit in any assessment context, the practice of assessment truly becomes a complex social practice rather than a collection of technical data gathering approaches that might unwittingly serve power interests unintended by well-meaning individuals.

We need assessment practices that are transparent, transformative, and oriented toward addressing consumer needs and questions of practical philosophy about how higher education is serving society. Administrative managerialism in assessment practice needs to be replaced by an ethical and value focused approach to assessment where shared campus engagement facilitates learning for its most important stakeholder, the diverse public (Leville, 2005). Assessment practice should be constructed as a place of inclusive, sustained, and informed dialogue, not one that is simply a technical and procedure process that strives for validity rather than purpose and transparency.

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AUTHOR’S NOTE

For my wife and my children. - Andrew

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